

Wang Fu

and The Comments of a Recluse

by Margaret J. Pearson

I began reading the Ch'ien-fu lun in the stacks of the East Asian Library at Columbia University in 1975. Since then, many people have provided assistance to my work on Wang Fu. A much-abbreviated version of the political thought section in this study was published in CINA 21 (Roma, 1988), pp. 281-88.

Introduction

The *Comments of a Recluse* (*Ch'ien-fu lun*) by Wang Fu (fl. A.D. 150) has had a profound influence on Chinese intellectual history. First, as a rich source of information on governmental activities and on daily life during the middle years of the Later Han dynasty (AD. 25-220), the *Comments* was considered by Fan Yeh (398-446)—the compiler of the standard *History of the Later Han* (*Hou Han shu*)—"sufficient for the observation of the customs and government of the time." This affirmation of the value of the *Comments* has been echoed by later historians and sinologists. Hsiao Kung-ch'üan, for example, called the work "profoundly discerning and aptly succinct." Etienne Balazs called Wang Fu "the most important eyewitness of his times, about which we would know very little if it were not for his account."

Second, Wang Fu has been an exemplar for later Chinese reformers and critics of government. The great T'ang dynasty Confucian Han Yü (768-824) wrote an essay, "*In Praise of Three Worthies of the Later Han*," one of whose figures was Wang Fu. About a millennium later, such praise was repeated by Ch'ing dynasty dissidents in Che-kiang province.

Third, the book is one of the longest surviving works representing the syncretic and critical thinking of Later Han dissidents. These men—

Huan T'an, Wang Fu Ts'ui Shih, Hsün Yüeh, and Hsü Kuan all had as their intention to apply their lancets to current evils and be rid of them; ...all [but Huan T'an] were born during the reigns of Emperors Ho and An (A.D. 89-125) or later, and lived through the final century of Later Han's gradual decline and fall.

As the preceding passage indicates, Wang Fu was not just a theorist. Most of his concerns were related to issues of statecraft rather than to abstract philosophical concepts.

To understand his ideas better we need to review his life and the sources of his information, concerning which the *Hou Han shu* biographies of Wang Fu and his friends provide useful though scarcely detailed knowledge.

To improve access to the text itself, I have included translations from the portions of the *Comments* most crucial to an understanding of Wang Fu's central theme—his political thought. I have also translated nearly in its entirety the *Hou Han shu* biography of Wang Fu, the source from which most people have read his work.

The *Comments* has been read for nearly two thousand years. It is one of the few works of the time to survive the fall of the Han and the subsequent years of conquest, disunity, and instability. The book has been studied by T'ang, Sung, Ming and Ch'ing scholars and reformers. In the last ten years, modern scholars have written about it in the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, and the United States. A new edition with modern punctuation was published in Shang-hai in 1978 and in Peking in 1979. Nevertheless, few Westerners have had access to the work since only a few pages have been translated. This monograph is intended as a step towards redressing the situation.

Background

Wang Fu lived during the middle decades of the Later Han; that is, from about A.D. 88 to 166. When he was born, China's area stretched nearly as far as it does today; to many it must have seemed impregnable. Within its boundaries, the imperial, bureaucracy functioned fairly effectively, knitting this large area together with laws, rites, and procedures governing economic, social, political, military, and cosmological aspects of life. Centrally appointed officials directed and maintained public services with the help of locally enlisted gentry and corvée laborers. For nearly three and one half centuries, this 'system operated with only one brief, bloody interregnum, from A.D. 9 to 25.

But the system had begun to erode, and that was the primary subject of Wang Fu's work. The first three emperors of the Later Han proved themselves capable of shouldering myriad responsibilities: determining policy, promulgating laws, appointing officials, and acting as final arbiters of all disputes. But these three mature rulers were succeeded by a series of child emperors. Such youthful monarchs, "born in the depths of the palace and raised by the hands of women," knew little of the world outside. Surrounded by ritual and intrigue, most were pawns of their mothers' relatives and few lived to maturity. Four consort clans had a virtual monopoly on the roles of empress and empress dowager. Fathers or elder brothers dominated the official hierarchy. High positions were held either by relatives or their supporters.

Two of Wang Fu's friends, Ma Jung (89-166) and Tou Chang (d. 144), were members of consort clans. They grew up at a time when their families were out of favor and in exile from the capital. Later, Tou Chang's daughter was a favorite of Emperor Shun. Her father held high positions during the rise of the Liang clan. Wang Fu's denunciations of the excesses of the consort clans reflect this era. His warnings of the dangers of favoritism may have been based on intimate knowledge of the careers of his friends and their families.

Cosmic Content and Religion

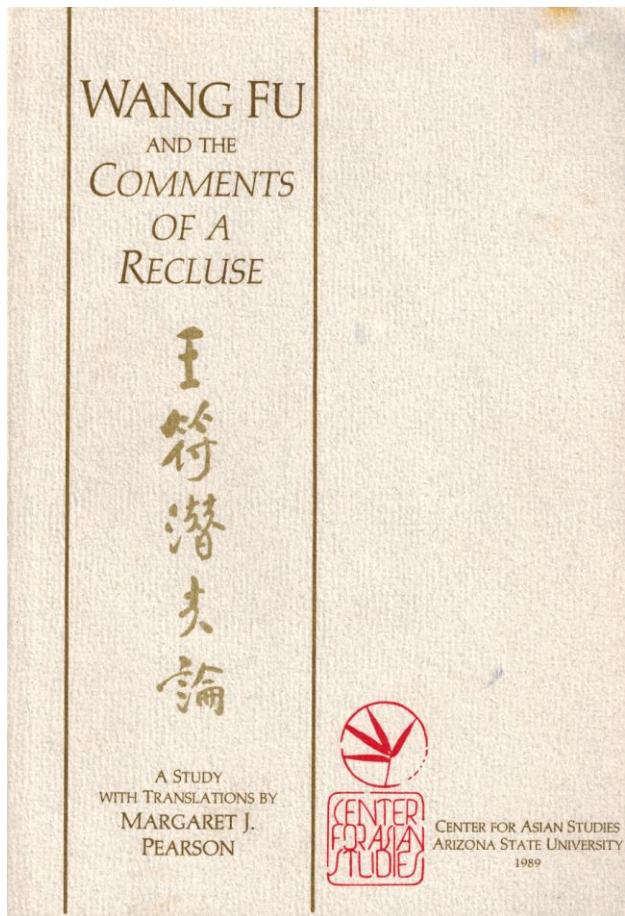
Although Confucius "never talked of prodigies, feats of strength, disorders or spirits," or of the creation and nature of the universe, these topics were essential elements in the Confucianism supported by the imperial court during the Han dynasty. As Charles Hucker has noted:

Metaphysical and cosmological thinking, which had seemed rather capricious aberrations in pre-Ch'in times, now surged into the mainstream of China's intellectual history. Even conservative Confucians turned their attention to vague questions about the nature of the cosmos and mankind's place in it.

The Confucianism that Tung Chung-shu had successfully advocated for adoption as the court's orthodoxy during the Former Han included a cosmological framework derived from the yin-yang and five-elements school of Tsou Yen (d. 270? B.C.), and from New Text commentaries to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* attributed to Confucius.

In keeping with Wang Fu's own emphasis, this monograph focuses on Wang Fu's political thought. However, if we are to understand his relationship to other thinkers of the Han, we cannot disregard his cosmological views because, as Hou Wai-lu and Hu Ch'u-sheng have noted, it is in his description of the creation of the cosmos that we find one of Wang Fu's clearest statements of the importance and efficacy of human action. His political theories are designed to promote the effective action of men worthy of positions of responsibility. Furthermore, when Wang Fu discusses supernatural phenomena such as ghosts and divination, his views are quite similar to those of other thinkers of the Later Han, such as Wang Ch'ung and Huan T'an, whom Pokora has characterized as "skeptics."

Although Jung Chao-tsu considers Wang Fu more superstitious than Wang Ch'ung, Hou Wai-lu reverses this comparison. Certainly both were less credulous than most of their contemporaries, even though we cannot consider them rational in modern terms, both because of their belief in the interaction between heaven, earth, and man, and given the fact that, although they thought ghosts unimportant, they



were not convinced ghosts did not exist. Furthermore, Wang Fu generally argues from historical example and classical citation rather than from cosmological portent. This proclivity is consistent with the Old Text views of his friends Chang Heng, an astronomer who opposed the use of apocrypha, and Ma Jung, who with his student Cheng Hsuan "made the Old Text School illustrious."

Wang Fu describes the creation of the cosmos as follows:

In the most ancient era—in the time of great simplicity—...the myriad essences were united together, undifferentiated and acting as one... Suddenly there was a self-transformation: the clear and the obscure separated, transforming into yin and yang.... Heaven is rooted in yang; earth is rooted in yin; and man is rooted in the mediating harmony between them. These three powers have differing duties and support each other to come to completion.....Heaven's Way is called "granting"; earth's Way is called "transforming"; and man's Way is called "acting."

Both

Hu Ch'u-sheng and Hou Wai-lu consider this last statement, that "man's Way is called 'acting,'" a central element of Wang Fu's thought. This formulation is particularly striking when compared with the emphasis on inaction (wu-wei) of the Taoists and Neo-Taoists of the Wei-Chin period immediately following the Han.

Excerpts from the writings of Wang Fu:

Thinking of Worthies

A state survives because it has order; it perishes because it has disorder. All rulers cherish order and loathe disorder, delight in the state's existence and fear its demise. However, when we peruse the records of the ancient past, we see that since more recent times three states have perished and been replaced, and countless states have been eliminated. Why is this the case?

We can see that each collapse resulted from the ruler's constant delight in disorder and loathing of order, in his hatred for what brought order and in his love for what brought destruction. For this reason, even though a hundred generations have elapsed and several thousand years have passed – and even though the empire is divided into nine provinces with

Wang Fu

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valuable
are people.

differing customs ever thousand *li* – “still the traces of decline and fall match exactly,” like the halves of a tally or like work done with compass and square.

Those who have the same illnesses the dead had cannot live. “Those who act the same way a defunct state did cannot survive.” “Surely, this is no empty saying!” How do we know that a person will be ill? Because he does not enjoy food. How do we know a state will become unruly? Because the ruler does not delight in worthies. Thus, it is not that the kitchen in a household is without good food, but that the sick person is unable to eat, that he finally dies. As for the offices of a disordered state, it is not because the state lacks worthy men, but because the ruler does not use them, that the state finally perishes.

Amnesties

All who heal disease must know both the emptiness or fullness of the pulse and what it is that blocks the *ch'i*, and then they can prescribe for them. Thus, sickness can be cured and longevity extended. Rulers must first know what afflicts the people and what gives rise to their sufferings, and then they can act on their behalf to stop such problems. Thus evil can be contained and the state can be secure. Nowadays, of the policies robbing good people, none is greater than the repeated granting of pardons and conversions of punishments to fines. If pardons and conversions to fines are numerous, than the evil will thrive and the good be injured. How can this be made clear?

Cautious and devoted men do not do wrong; correct and upright officials do not avoid strong proscriptions. But evil and cunning clique members irresponsibly engage in slander because they all know that a pardon will soon be forthcoming. Many thousands of good men and gentlemen resent being wronged, but only a few of them are able to go [to] the palace court and plead for themselves. Only one percent of them are able to get a close hearing, facing the Master of Writing. And of these, sixty or seventy percent are sent away empty-handed.

As for those who blithely violate the regulations and then run afoul of the law, the families [of their victims], feeling poisonous resentment, hope that the former will be killed for their crimes in order to assuage their accumulated ire. But the malefactors are all pardoned and released instead.

On the Grudging of Days

A state becomes a state because it has people. Commoners become its populace because they have grain. Because they make an effort, grain is planted abundantly. Their daily exertion enables effective labor to be established. A transformed state's days are unhurried and long; thus its people have leisure and surplus strength. A chaotic state's days are rushed and short; thus its people labor with difficulty and their strength is insufficient. When I say that a state's days are “unhurried and long,” I do not mean that Hsi and Ho order [the sun and the moon] to move more slowly. I mean that the rule is enlightened and the people at peace. Therefore the people's strength is more than adequate.

Confucius said, “If the people are numerous, then make them prosperous; and if they are prosperous, then teach them.” Thus, propriety and righteousness issue from there being wealth and enough for all, and theft and robbery arise from poverty and deprivation. Ample leisure creates prosperity and enough for all, while poverty arises from thieve being a lack of days (too little time).

Let us set aside the fact that heaven above, pained at this state of affairs, sends disasters, and discuss the matter instead of the basis of human effort. From the level of the ducal ministries and commanderies to that of district and prefecture, an ordinary man becomes enmeshed in a bureaucracy of legal officials. So those who by turns are being examined before the court, on a single day, can number one hundred thousand. When one person has a case, there are two more who manage it. Thus, three hundred thousand people abandon their occupations every day. If we take an average farmer as a standard, then this year three million will suffer hunger [from the time lost]. When this is the case, how can thieves and robbers be pursued and eliminated, and Great Peace be forthcoming and carried out? The *Odes* says, “There is no one who is willing to heed the chaos; / Yet who has no parents?” “If the people are in want, their prince cannot enjoy plenty alone.” How can we not ponder this! How can we not ponder this!